Chicago's new 606 trail a boon for open space, neighborhoods it links

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From the air, it resembles a thin gray ribbon, stretching almost endlessly as it wends its way through a thicket of factory smokestacks and cheek-by-jowl houses.

Closer to the ground, it becomes intimate, a platform from which to sample the sights, sounds, smells and shifting rhythms of four Chicago neighborhoods. Soon, you'll be able to bike it, walk and run on it, or simply eyeball its emerging gallery of plants and trees.

The 606, which takes its name from Chicago's ZIP code prefix and whose centerpiece is a 2.7-mile recreational and cultural trail, is a bold and potentially brilliant reinvention of a dormant and derelict elevated freight line that blighted Northwest Side neighborhoods such as Bucktown and Logan Square.

Opening next Saturday, which not coincidentally happens to be 6/06, the $75 million project could be the city's next great public space if it draws crowds to its out-of-the-way location but doesn't duplicate the congested mayhem of the lakefront trail or drive its neighbors crazy with graffiti and noise.

Those are all big "ifs," to which we won't know the answers for weeks, even months. What's clear now is that the 606 marks a major step forward in Mayor Rahm Emanuel's drive to make Chicago's gritty, off-the-lakefront stretches a more livable shade of green. Goodbye, junkies and rock-throwing trespassers. Hello, cyclists and rising property values. A barrier that once divided communities that are economically and ethnically disparate may become a zipper that unites them.

The 606 is Chicago's response to Manhattan's acclaimed High Line, which converted a similarly dilapidated, 1.45-mile stretch of elevated freight tracks into an uber-chic promenade that reportedly drew more than 6 million people last year — a million more than Millennium Park.

Despite the two trails differences in style, setting and price tag — the 606, when complete, will be about half the cost of the High Line even though it's nearly twice as long — both symbolize the movement to soften hard-edged urban areas without turning them into watered-down versions of suburbia. That matters in a once-booming metropolis like Chicago, which grew by only 82 residents last year, the smallest advance among the top 10 U.S.

cities.

Fiscal hawks will predictably cite Chicago's red ink-stained books and shout: "How can we afford to do this?" But the real question is: How could Chicago not afford to make an improvement like this with the federal government and private donors picking up all but $5 million of the tab? Cities that don't seize upon such opportunities are sacrificing their future on the altar of excessive caution.

Developed by the city of Chicago, the Chicago Park District and the Trust for Public Land, a San Francisco-based nonprofit whose Chicago-area office is directed by Beth White, the 606 is a classic case of reinvention piled atop reinvention.

In its original state, it was the elevated Bloomingdale Line, completed in 1915 along Bloomingdale Avenue to prevent trains from killing and maiming any more people at street-level crossings. Its tracks rested atop an earthen embankment framed by massive concrete walls more than 17 feet high.

This engineering marvel enabled trains to deliver raw materials to factories along the trail and ship out their finished goods, everything from fine furniture to Hammond organs. But trucking made the line obsolete. By the 1990s, city planners and neighborhood activists started kicking around the seemingly improbable idea of turning this outdated piece of industrial infrastructure into a public amenity for park-poor neighborhoods like Logan Square.

Miraculously, that dream has come true, coaxed into reality by Emanuel's strong support and a design team composed of Chicago's Collins Engineering, Brooklyn-based Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, and artist Frances Whitehead, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Credit also goes to the federal government, which provided $50 million from a pot that strives to reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality.

But the strings attached to that funding created a dilemma for the designers: The 606 had to include a bike trail (the finished trail is 10 feet wide with flanking 2-foot-wide shoulders for joggers.) Yet within the narrow confines of the old Bloomingdale Line, the bike trail would leave little room for broad swaths of open space where kids could run and play catch.

The solution? A chain of four (with two more planned) ground-level parks, such as the playful Julia de Burgos Park, which are strung along the trail like gems on a bracelet. Broad access ramps also tether the 606 to the ground, further differentiating it from the High Line, whose pathway seems to float above Manhattan's streets.

At worst, such elevated linear spaces offer an endless parade of sameness. To avoid that pitfall (and slow down speeding cyclists), the Chicago trail curves, dips and rises, revealing portions of the Bloomingdale Line's original, hard-edged retaining walls.

The muscular walls are one of several elements — including galvanized steel railings, graceful, arcing lights and gently renovated bridges — that remain faithful to the old line's industrial character rather than turning it into an urban Disneyland. Surrounding scenery (factory smokestacks, water towers, and passing Amtrak, CTA and Metra trains) adds to the sense of true Chicago grit.

An "arcade" of trees and plants, among them evergreens, paperbark maples and sumacs, eventually will provide even more variety, creating an almost-cinematic montage for cyclists zipping down the trail. At this stage, most of the plants are small and unimpressive, but an elegant grove of fluttering poplars on the trail's west side hints at the delight to come in three to five years.

Of course, people don't just move through public spaces; they want to stop and linger. Here, the jury is still out on the 606.

There's at least one wonderful spot to pause — a bridge overlooking the formal, grassy grandeur of Humboldt Boulevard that's outfitted with tall, wood-lined benches and arching lights that resemble croquet wickets. Matthew Urbanski, Van Valkenburgh's lead landscape architect on the 606, whimsically likens the arrangement to shoeshine benches.

But seating was not ample during a recent tour. An absence of restrooms — there are none on the trail or in the adjoining parks — could also discourage some visitors, particularly families with children, though the 606's organizers plan to identify nearby restrooms on their website.

Parking also could be a challenge too, particularly in Bucktown and Wicker Park. You don't build a parking garage when you're getting federal funding to cut down on driving.

There are some bad strokes, such as the decision to paint the trail's most iconic element — a rebuilt bridge over Milwaukee Avenue with three new arches — the same burgundy color as the historic bridges over the Chicago River and other bridges on the 606. The bridge, which could have been a shining symbol of the future, looks like it's been antiqued.

In general, though, the design team and their clients have done fine, even heroic work, upgrading not only the trail but the cityscape around it. Cars and trucks easily can pass beneath the Milwaukee Avenue Bridge, for example, because the span no longer has obtrusive supporting columns and its deck is higher than before.

Collins' lead engineers, Stan Kaderbek (now with another firm) and James Hamelka, have worked a similar transformation at Western Avenue, where a crumbling bridge was demolished and replaced by one that used to cross Ashland Avenue. Last year, the Ashland bridge was taken down and moved through the streets in a spectacle that Whitehead, the artist on the 606 team, compares to a parade of elephants in the circus.

White, of the Trust for Public Land, and city officials deserve kudos for assembling this left-brain/right-brain team, which was equal parts rigor and creativity.

Pushed by Whitehead, the collaboration produced such interactive elements as a spiraling observatory on the trail's western end that's both a visual punctuation mark and a spot from which to observe solstices and equinoxes.

On the eastern end, a curving concrete wall serves a dual purpose, muffling noise from the adjacent Kennedy Expressway and providing another eye-catching end-note for the trail. Plans call for this "soundwall" to be covered with roses.

At Whitehead's urging, the trail is embedded with steel distance markers that are not just a convenience for cyclists and runners. The markers will allow scientists to track the "rolling bloom" that proceeds from west to east as a result of microclimates produced by Lake Michigan. The results, Whitehead believes, could vividly show how climate change is having a long-term impact on plant growth and the ecosystem.

Here, the 606 strives to be more than a recreational amenity. It seeks to integrate art and science, pleasure and provocation. But its simple pleasures are the ones that matter most.

Like the tour boats that glide along the Chicago River, separated from downtown's noise and congestion, the trail presents a different plane from which to see the city — in this case, the outlying neighborhoods rather than the

glamorous downtown. In doing so, it broadens our vision and raises our sights. Park District officials already are looking at building a comparable rails-to-trails project in the South Side's Englewood neighborhood.

Now that Chicago has begun reinventing and reviving its gritty inner-city areas with potentially great public spaces like the 606, it should be hard — and politically unacceptable — to stop.

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